

July 11, 2007

**Statement of Congressman Pete Stark
Supporting Elderly and Disabled Refugees**

Madam Speaker, I rise today in strong support of assisting immigrants who Congress invited to live in the United States because they were being persecuted in their home countries.

Refugees arrive in this country with little more than the clothes on their backs. They often have no family in the United States. For those immigrants who are elderly or have disabilities and cannot work, their sole source of income is often the meager benefits -typically around \$600 per month - provided by the SSI program.

Under draconian provisions of 1996's so-called "Welfare Reform" law, refugees and asylees can only receive SSI benefits for a maximum of seven years. To date, this law has caused more than 12,000 elderly and disabled humanitarian immigrants to lose their benefits and face hunger and homelessness. The Social Security Administration has estimated that an additional 40,000 individuals will be terminated from assistance in the next 10 years if the law is not changed. Leaving immigrants, who have suffered so much and come to the United States in search of protection, destitute with no means of support is unconscionable.

Current law assumes that refugees and asylees can complete the lengthy and expensive citizenship process within seven years and continue receiving benefits. For most refugees there is a mandatory five year waiting period before they can even apply for citizenship. With application backlogs that regularly near one million, becoming naturalized within seven years is a longshot at best. Acquiring the skills needed to pass the citizenship test, such as English language proficiency, may be impossible for immigrants with severe disabilities.

The SSI Extension for Elderly and Disabled Refugees Act (H.R. 2608) takes the common sense and compassionate approach of temporarily extending the time limit by 2 years. This will provide relief to thousands of individuals facing the loss of their sole source of support.

While this bill is the best we can do given the present fiscal environment, we should move toward completely removing the time limits. Doing so would bring us into compliance with International Conventions requiring nations to accord lawful refugees the same access to public benefits that they allow their own citizens. In addition, it would build on our nation's tradition of opening our borders to immigrants escaping persecution and suffering.

I urge my colleagues to support this important bill, but I hope everyone recognizes that this bill only represents a partial fix.

[The Ways and Means Committee recently heard from a Montagnard refugee from Vietnam who had fought alongside U.S. troops during the Vietnam War. He was wounded during the war and taken prisoner. After release, he came to the U.S. as a refugee. He worked for several years, before his disability made it impossible to continue at which point he began receiving SSI. In 2003, he was terminated from benefits because of the 7 year time limit. Currently, his only source of income is \$280 in food stamps. His son has dropped out of school to care for him]